



Your Guide to Understanding School Meals



An Overview of School Meals

Many schools in Montana participate in the USDA's (United States Department of Agriculture) School Nutrition Programs. These programs include School Lunch, School Breakfast, Afterschool Snack, and the Special Milk programs. If your school participates in one of these programs, there are certain requirements that the food they serve to children must meet. The most important thing to understand about meals served by schools participating in School Nutrition Programs is they are designed to meet certain goals set out by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Over the course of a week, all school meals must meet...

- **Recommended Daily Allowances (RDA's)**
 - 1/3 RDA for lunch
 - 1/4 RDA for breakfast
 - Age appropriate
- **Calorie Goals**
 - Age appropriate
- **Dietary Guidelines for Americans**

These goals are the basis for the design of the menu plans. When a school participates in a School Nutrition Program, they are required by the USDA to meet these goals using certain menu plans. Schools can choose to use a food-based plan (Traditional or Enhanced) or a nutrient-standard plan (NSMP). Schools using food-based plans are required to include a certain number of servings from all the food groups daily. Schools using nutrient-based plans are required to provide foods that meet the RDAs over the course of the week. A more specific discussion of each of these plans is on the next page.

Nutrients most closely monitored are:

- ✓ *Calories*
- ✓ *Protein*
- ✓ *Calcium*
- ✓ *Iron*
- ✓ *Vitamins A & C*
- ✓ *Total fat and saturated fat*

It is important to realize that children have energy and nutrient requirements that are higher than adults. School meals are designed to meet these age-specific needs, which means they are higher in calories and fat than an average adult-appropriate meal. It is also important to notice that school meals are designed to meet nutrition requirements over time. For example, one meal might consist of high fat foods, but it will be balanced out over the course of the week by lower fat meals.

Types of Meal Plans:

- **Traditional Food-Based Menu Planning:** This is the oldest menu planning system. It is based on the four food groups: milk, meat/meat alternate, bread/grains, and fruits/vegetables. This system requires specific food group components in specific amounts for specific age groups every day.

Using the Traditional plan, a reimbursable lunch for grades 4-12 must consist of...

- ✓ 2 ounces of lean meat or other protein food
- ✓ 1 slice of bread or $\frac{1}{2}$ cup grains (8 servings per week)
- ✓ $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of vegetable/fruit (two different kinds)
- ✓ 8 fluid ounces of milk.

- **Enhanced Food-Based Menu Planning:** Similar to the Traditional system, but this system is modeled after the Food Guide Pyramid, and thus requires more servings of Fruits/Vegetables and Grains/Breads.

Specifically, lunches for grades 6-12 must provide...

- ✓ 2 ounces of lean meat
- ✓ At least 15 servings of grains over the week
- ✓ At least $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of fruits/vegetables every day (two different kinds)
- ✓ 8 fluid ounces of milk

- **Nutrient Standard Menu Planning (NSMP):** This meal plan is based on nutrients, not food groups. Schools that use this meal plan are required to conduct a computer analysis of their menus to ensure that they meet at least $\frac{1}{3}$ of the RDA in specific nutrients (listed above) for lunch and $\frac{1}{4}$ of the RDA for breakfast.

For lunch, schools using NSMP must include...

- ✓ Entrée
- ✓ Side dish.
- ✓ 8 fluid ounces of milk served as a beverage

Children must take the entree and at least one other item for the meal to be reimbursable.

It is important to remember that nutrients are averaged for a whole week, so some meals may be higher or lower in certain nutrients as long as they balance out over the course of a week.

- **Assisted NSMP:** Exactly like NSMP except *menu planning and analysis is conducted by an agency other than the school food service*. This option is useful for schools that do not have access to the equipment they would need to conduct a menu analysis.



Where can I find more information?



- “A Menu Planner for Healthy School Meals.”
Every school that participates in School Nutrition Programs should have a copy of this planner in a purple binder. It has complete information on reimbursable meals including charts, grade groups, menu planning suggestions, and much more.
- Call School Nutrition Programs at the Office of Public Instruction at (406) 444-2501, or look online at www.opi.state.mt.us/schoolfood/index.html
- For more information on USDA’s Child Nutrition Programs, go to www.fns.usda.gov



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